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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

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Benjamin J. Hartmann, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Katja H. Brunk, European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (O), Germany

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### **[to cite]:**

Benjamin J. Hartmann and Katja H. Brunk (2015) , "Negotiating the Merger of Contrasting Consumer Cultures: Ideological Myth and Identity.", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 43, eds. Kristin Diehl and Carolyn Yoon, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 358-363.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019901/volumes/v43/NA-43>

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# Negotiating The Merger of Contrasting Consumer Cultures: Ideological Myth and Identity.

Benjamin J. Hartmann, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Katja H. Brunk, European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (O), Germany

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the processes at play in an institutionally-induced merger of two consumer cultures with contrasting ideological grids. Using qualitative empirical material, we elucidate the role of ideological myths and mythologization processes that undergird consumption and identity projects in the negotiation of consumer cultures.

## INTRODUCTION

How do consumer cultures merge? Previous consumer research has been concerned with the transformation of consumer cultures induced by the global diffusion of western consumer culture and how it is moving into new ideological and geographic spaces (e.g., Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Xin and Belk 2008), and induced by recursive acculturative processes between migrant groups of consumers and consumers of a host culture (Luedicke 2011). By contrast, the larger societal processes at play in the merger of consumer cultures have so far received little attention.

Following Holt (2002, 80), a consumer culture is “the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume”. Consumption, then, can be seen as an ideological tension field, such as illustrated by research that identifies ideologically-loaded consumer movements as a source of transformation of consumer culture (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), and research that shows how consumer cultures evolve by integrating conflicts between opposing groups of consumers and producers with different ideological goals (Giesler 2008). While these studies generate valuable insights into the transformative processes *within* consumer cultures, they de-emphasize the transformative processes that take place in the negotiation of consumer cultures with distinct and different ideological underpinnings.

In this article we explore and illustrate the processes at play in the merger of such two contrasting consumer cultures. To do this, we mobilize the empirical context of the German re-unification, which presents a case in which two consumption cultures with opposing value systems and ideological grids meet: after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and decades of cold-war separation, the two separated German national states and their contrasting consumer cultures—a capitalist consumer culture of abundance and freedom of choice in the former West-Germany (FRG) and a socialist consumer culture of permanent scarcity in the former East-Germany (GDR)—encounter in the national project of sociopolitical re-unification, a merger aiming to create a unified Germany. Thus, with the sudden political erosion of the socialist GDR state, GDR consumers find themselves in a state of dislocation and contestation of the previous GDR consumer culture in which the socialist ideological underpinnings and mythologies, as well as GDR products, services, and consumption practices are replaced by their ‘capitalist’ counterparts (Blum 2000; Merkel 2006; Veenis 1999). With the FRG being the omnipresent reference culture for material prosperity ever since the separation of the ideologically opposing states (Landsman 2005), the long-awaited arrival of Western consumer culture was greeted with euphoria. Yet, while institutional national unity was swiftly achieved, the political goal of societal national unity is still work-in-progress today, often referred to as ‘the wall in people’s heads’ (Hogwood 2000).

Using this empirical context offers opportunities to investigate the merger of two consumer cultures by looking at the negotiation of conflicting value systems and ideological underpinnings, and how this is played out in consumption with specific attention to the role of ideological myths and mythologization processes that undergird consumption and thus consumers’ identity projects in this negotiation.

## IDEOLOGICAL MYTH AND IDENTITY IN SOCIALIST AND CAPITALIST CONSUMER CULTURES

To approach the dynamics and complexities of the negotiation between a capitalist and socialist consumer culture it is useful to focus attention to the imbricated coatings of ideological myth that characterizes these consumer cultures. According to Stern (1995, 165), “the central cultural role of myth (...) stems from its function in explaining the nature of the world and the rationale for social conduct in a given culture.” In this light, both capitalism and socialism are myth-imbued ideological positions offering an array of tales specifically relating to consumption that propose a grand narrative, a societal blueprint and rationale for everyday living and consumption. Following Lévi-Strauss (1963), these tales can be used to mitigate the tensions that arise in the course of everyday living. Thus, capitalist and socialist myths relate to what Brown et al. (2013) call singularizing myths, allowing consumers to pursue their individual and collective identity projects in mutual exclusion of the other respective ideological position.

Most capitalist consumer cultures are firmly built on a consumption myth that propagates free choice and the salvation of individual and collective identity through myth-imbued brands and consumption practices (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Holt 2002; 2004; Muniz and Schau 2005; Thompson 2004; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). By contrast, most socialist consumer cultures are firmly built on Marxian-type productive human labor narratives as the grand plot for everyday life, meaning, and consumption. For example, the version of Marxism-Leninism in place in the GDR centrally stipulated a 5-year economic production plan of the planned economy shaped a consumer culture characterized by permanent shortage—not all products were available for purchase at all times (Landsman 2005). Thus, consumers queued in endless lines in front of retail stores when there were special items for sale, and typically, also hoarded everyday consumption items that could be used for trading another desired but not obtainable item.

Whereas most western-style consumer cultures proselytize primarily individual identity and consumption myth via the market, most socialist consumer cultures draw from the Communist Manifesto (Marx and Engels 1848) to indoctrinate primarily collective identity and a production myth by means of social institutions. Consumption, then, is per Marx an important aspect of production, as a product becomes only a “real product in consumption” (Marx 1971, 25). Thus, production necessitates consumption as the concluding act of production, rendering the producer a producer. Therefore, consumption is vital in the socialist consumer culture of the GDR, but primarily because it relates to state production—and in the mythology of socialism it is productive human labor that serves as a main platform for the construction of collective identity. The resulting key values of both consumption cultures are therefore in stark contrast

with each other: while the capitalist consumption culture fosters *individuality and distinction*, actualized through an abundance of goods and *freedom of choice*, the GDR consumption culture served to enact one of the central tenets of socialism, namely that of *community and equality* in material and social status, enforced by a shortage of consumer goods and *restrained freedom of choice* by the state.

However, Barthes (1973/1957) reminds us that mythoi are ambiguous, potentially holding a vast array of signifiers floating around. Thus, in line with previous research noting the ambiguity of myths (e.g., Brown et al 2013; Thompson and Tian 2008), the ideological myths surrounding capitalist and socialist consumer cultures are also not pure, but ambiguous and even paradox. In our context, and because of the omnipresence of the FRG as a reference culture for material prosperity, GDR officials were caught between the tenets of the Soviet model, calling for production-orientation and modesty in consumption, and the rising pressure caused by growing prosperity and emerging mass consumption on the other side of the Wall. GDR leaders responded by initiating the production of socialist ideology-infused copy-cat brands of Western icons in the belief that the consumption of surrogate icons of the West would secure the hegemony of the socialist state (Landsman 2005). Hence paradoxically, GDR leaders emulated a Western-style consumer culture—whereby further increasing the longing for participation in it—while at the same time openly condemning it (Veenis 2011). The socialist mythology dominant in the GDR therefore involves consumption on the one hand as a collective endeavor, uniting citizens in scarcity. On the other hand, it also involves consumption as an individual endeavor, with consumers yearning to express their individual identity by differentiating themselves from the collective unitary style.

The literature has established that myths play a vital role in consumers' identity projects (e.g., Thompson 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Muñoz and Schau 2005). But what happens when the mythological foundations for identity construction are questioned and re-negotiated on a national scale such as the case of the merger of the GDR and FRG, in East German public discourse often portrayed as an annexation? Although there is a growing body investigating consumption in contexts of shattered and destabilized identities (Schau, Gilly, and Wolfenbarger 2009; Klein, Lowrey and Otnes's forthcoming; McAlexander et al. 2014), such research discusses primarily individual consumers' identity crisis, for example when consumers are retiring, or when they leave religious institutions. The role of myth and ideology in these crises remains relatively de-emphasized. Hence, while the literature has established that consumers select myths to build their identity, little is known about the dynamics of myth and identity formation in the context of a collapse of an entire ideology and consumer culture. In this article, we explore this set of issues by asking the following research questions: i) what happens in the merger of consumer cultures with opposing ideologies? ii) what is the role of ideological myths undergirding the subsequent negotiation processes and individual/collective identity projects?

## METHOD

We approach these questions from the angle of GDR consumers who, in the course of the re-unification, find themselves in a state of dislocation and contestation of the previous GDR consumer culture. With this empirical context our investigation follows calls for deepening the theoretical understanding of the sociohistoric forces at play in consumption cultures (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2001).

**Data collection.** Methodologically our research approach builds on linking a historical perspective with the present via con-

sumers' cultural trajectories by collecting the following combination of qualitative empirical material: (1) historical data and documentaries as well as other culturally relevant material from mass media; (2) friendship profile-book entries from the late 1980s; (3) guided consumer introspections (Brown 1998; Gould 1995; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993); as well as (4) netnography (Kozinets 2002; 2010). The analysis of friendship profile books—which can be understood as an analog version of Facebook, where friends enter a written personal profile about who they are, what they dis/like and what they dream of—serves to contextualize identity construction in the GDR back then. Historical data as well as guided introspections illuminate the socialist consumer culture as well as the cultural trajectory to a capitalist culture, while netnographic material contributes by revealing how the cultural transition is reified in consumption practices today. The data set consists of 217 pages of introspective essays, 334 A5 pages of friendship profile book entries, 1273 pages of downloaded netnographic posts, as well as historical data, press material and documentaries.

**Analysis.** The level of analysis is consumer culture, and we hold with Holt (2002) that consumer cultures are made up of and experienced through consumption practices, which in turn are intertwined with ideology, myth, and identity. Following Greimas (1966) we approach ideology, myth, and identity as consumer cultural narratives configuring a sign system. Thus, we conduct a narrative semiotic analysis on our material aiming to uncover relatively stable patterns that provide structure and meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1963). According to Haidu (1982), such semiotic narrative analysis is particularly suited to accommodate the transformations and dynamics in temporal and/or logical sequences of events, in our case the German re-unification. Thus, we analyzed the empirical material with a focus on changing patterns of ideology, myth, and intertwined identity following a hermeneutic process (Thompson 1997) including coding, recoding, constant comparison and iterative inter-researcher discussions, while triangulating between our data sources. Our semiotic analysis and coding started broadly and became increasingly specific. We began by focusing on consumers' cultural negotiations and the shift of the prevalent reference culture and related mutation of ideological myths over time, before advancing our conceptualization to establish links to consumption practices as well as instantiations of individual and collective identity.

## FINDINGS

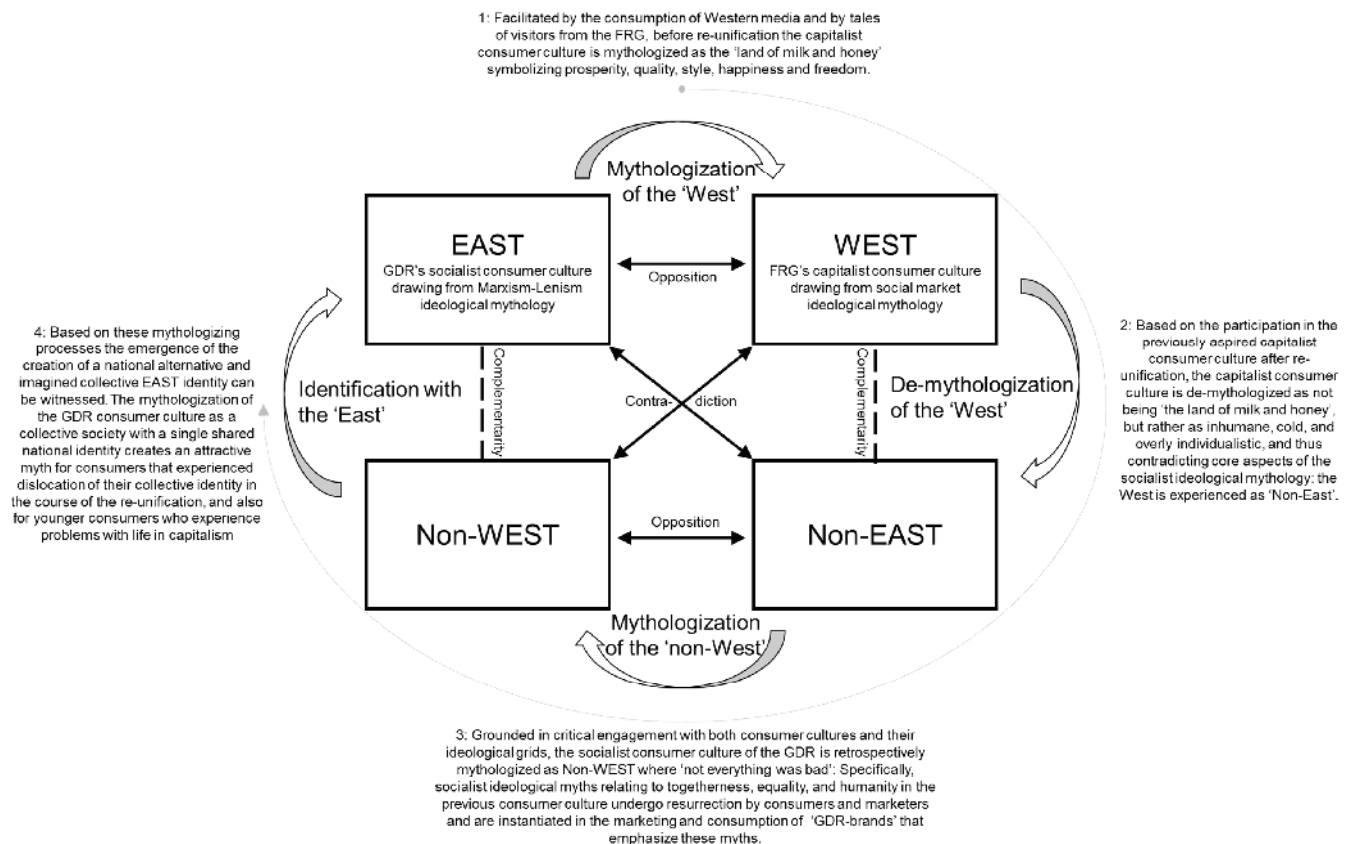
Our findings reveal the role of (ideological) mythologization in the negotiation process of the politically-induced merger of the GDR's socialist consumer culture with the FRG's capitalist consumer culture. Mythologization can be understood as the process of imparting mythical qualities to something (e.g., Holt and Thompson 2004; Brown et al. 2013), here a consumer culture. We find that consumption emerges as a key site for the negotiation of opposing ideological myths and the previously discussed values embedded within them. Thus, our findings specify the ways in which the negotiation process of two consumer cultures operates via processes of mythologization and de-mythologization, which in turn, are symptoms of ideological tensions linked to consumers' individual and collective identity projects.

To structure our findings, we utilize Greimas' (1987) semiotic square as an analytical tool capturing the ideological tension field between a socialist and capitalist consumer culture. The semiotic square unfolds and augments apparent binary oppositions, and was previously employed specifically to map ideological fields (Kozinets 2008), which are here given by the opposition of ideological mythology between 'East' and 'West' consumer cultures.

As shown in **figure 1**, our empirical material highlights how study participants experience the turn of historic events surrounding the German re-unification primarily as an opposition between and transition from the binary opposition of 'East' and 'West' (signifying Soviet bloc ideological mythology and its western counterparts, respectively). Thus, following Haidu (1982), we employ the semiotic square in a dynamic fashion to elucidate the historical dynamics of a larger societal transition within the tension field of EAST and WEST ideological mythology.

deeply frustrated by the lack of choice, permanent scarcity and the related time-consuming procurement measures to make ends meet, as well as the style and quality of available goods and the lack of opportunity for individual expression. Many consumption-related practices with collective participation and outcome (queueing, exchanging goods, DIY, bartering etc.) were perceived as burden back then. In line with Hogwood (2000), we find that for GDR consumers the FRG consumer culture was the primary and ever-present reference culture in terms of material prosperity, facilitated by consumption

**Figure 1: The negotiation of Germany's consumer cultures along the axis of East-West**



To contextualize the current dynamics of the negotiation process induced by the political re-unification of the two German national states, we begin by elucidating how 'the West' has been mythologized in GDR consumer culture. Then, we zoom in on how after the re-unification, 'the West' undergoes a form of de-mythologization (Arsel and Thompson 2011) by (re-)assembling its contradiction to the socialist consumer culture and thus as 'Non-East'. These processes form the basis of subsequent mythologization processes of 'the East' as 'Non-West' in which consumers turn towards iconic GDR marketplace resources signifying socialist ideology and values. Ultimately, the consumption of these icons serves former GDR consumers as 'symbolic salves' (Holt 2004) in their individual and collective identity projects identifying with the 'East'. **Table 1** provides illustrative data for each of the negotiation processes described below.

*Mythologization of capitalist consumer culture.* Before the re-unification, the GDR was politically and physically sealed off from the FRG. GDR socialist ideology emphasized equality and community as core values, which was imposed and reinforced by state planning and the related scarcity of consumption goods. Consumers were

of Western media and western brands—perceived as 'the real thing' (Veenis 1999)—sporadically entering the GDR. This becomes particularly apparent when analyzing East German's friendship profile-books. Entries in the 'what I dream of', 'music' and 'what I like' sections are dominated by references to FRG consumer culture and its brands, which are strategically leveraged for individual identity presentation. The 'what I don't like' section on the other hand includes references to GDR music, food and movies illustrating a rejection of GDR consumer culture. Having almost no opportunity for factual reference, the myth of the 'West' as the 'land of milk and honey' primarily sprung about through the consumption of western advertisements, and tales by those who visited or had visitors from members of the capitalist consumer culture. In these myths, Western consumer culture symbolizes prosperity, quality, style, happiness and freedom. Specifically, the term freedom is mythologized as marketized freedom (to travel and of consumption choice) and later would become a key driver of the peaceful revolution.

*De-mythologization of capitalist consumer culture.* With the sudden access to capitalist consumer culture in the course of the political re-unification, GDR consumers first subscribe to nearly all



Table 1: Summary of illustrative empirical material \*

Step in negotiating process	Myth	Illustrative data
Mythologization	Capitalism as the 'land of milk and honey'	My father is an architect [in the West]. One day, quite soon after the Wall fell, he came home from work and was really upset. His new colleague was from the East and asked him: 'Hey Dieter, why do you drive this old Volvo?' My father asked 'What do you mean?' and the colleague responded that my father ought to have the money to buy something better, like a Mercedes S class or so, as <i>everyone</i> in the West is rich and has nice cars. This really upset my father as this is obviously not the case and he liked the Volvo. I remember him saying 'what are they thinking over there? That we are all rolling in money?' (introspection)  I dare to claim that the people who went to the demonstrations back then, for example in Leipzig, that they didn't take to the streets for democratic value. They wanted the Westmark [FRG currency], travel [...]. In an interview one woman responded to the question of what she expected and wished for from the West by saying 'Smoking Marlboro and driving a Golf GTI'. I found that refreshingly honest. (introspection)
De-mythologization	Capitalism is inhumane, cold and overly individualistic.	Building materials for the house were bartered among neighbors, along the lines of 'if you have this, i can give you that'. The relationship, friendship and help among neighbors was different: more intensive! We knew that we could rely on ourselves to help each other. This is no longer the case, because everyone has to be selfish to get by. (introspection)  I very quickly realized that in the GDR we had acquired certain collective traits that all of a sudden proved to be very hindering. The normal GDR citizen was unhesitatingly communication-friendly and helpful in any situation. Whoever was unable to quickly suppress these commendable traits soon went to the dogs. (introspection)
Mythologization	Socialism is humane and collective.	I caught my daughters saying: 'do you remember how exciting that was, when we as children both queued for bananas for 1,5 hours, not allowed to speak to each other, because nobody mustn't find out that we were sisters, that way we could buy two portions just as if we were separate families?' (introspection)  On the sofa sits Thorsten Schön and raves about old GDR times: [...] 'This humaneness' that is what he misses the most, 'and the social cohesion.' The economy of scarcity including all the bartering 'was more like a hobby'. (media excerpt, Bonstein, Julia (2009), <i>Heimweh nach der Diktatur</i> , Der Spiegel, 27/2009, 124-126)
Identification	Shared, imagined national identity of "East German"	I am Ossi [East German] and this is really cool. I wasn't there to witness how things really were! BUT!!!! my mother and my grandpa told me enough, enough for me to say with pride that I am one of the last ones to have received a GDR birth certificate. And in case my children will ever ask 'what is GDR and why is this on your birth certificate?' i will proudly say.... this is the country in which I was born!!!!" (netnography)

aspects of the new ideological grid: individuality, distinction (differentiate yourself!) and freedom of choice, which goes hand in hand with a hyper-consumption of western consumption icons and the devaluation of the myths of socialist consumer culture (Berdahl 1999; Veenis 1999). Consumers exercise their newly gained freedom of choice and celebrate expressing their individuality also through consumption. However, personal experience and actualization of this aspired culture results in de-mythologization and the hegemony of the capitalist ideology becomes questioned. Thus, the capitalist consumer culture is de-mythologized based on consumers' experience of the capitalist consumer culture as missing core aspects of the socialist ideology: the West is experienced as 'Non-East'. The western myths emphasizing individuality, distinction and freedom have unexpected negative side effects grounded in the realization that individual means non-collective (imparting a loss of community) and that freedom of choice is not only a boon but also a curse—in cases where (i) financial resources restrict from participation, (ii) consumers feel lost, overwhelmed and overstimulated by the amount of choice and (iii) consumers lack the capability of sovereign decision making. Thus, our data is seeded with instantiations of de-mythologizing the previously aspired consumer culture as inhumane, cold, and overly individualistic.

*Mythologization of socialist consumer culture.* Critical engagement with both consumer cultures and their ideological grids led to the realization that the 'West' is 'nice' but contradicts the 'East', and not everything was 'bad' in the 'East'. While individuality and distinction are appreciated, there appears to be a trade-off with an unexpected loss of community (a notion previously taken for granted), equality, and humanity (referring primarily to job security and interpersonal exchange with other members of the consumer culture). This shift in the ideological grid is responded to by a selective resurrection of previous Non-West (non-individual/non-capitalist) myths. The negative aspects of the 'West' are subsequently exchanged with

positively mythologized aspects of the former 'East'. Grounded in this complementarity of the 'East' as 'Non-West', mythologization constructs a retrospective perspective of the previous socialist consumer culture as 'Non-West'. Specifically, the myths relating to togetherness, equality, and humanity in the previous consumer culture undergo resurrection by both, consumers and marketers. Firms begin marketing products as 'GDR-brands', specifically emphasizing these myths. The overall deterioration of social cohesion becomes apparent and leads to critical reflections, channeled through the wholesale devaluation of East German consumption objects and practices. For the first time since the GDR's existence, it is considered as a reference culture, whereby the socialist consumer culture is mythologized as being entirely non-individualistic, offering a blueprint of a collective identity that any consumer could subscribe to in their identity projects. Previously highly frustrating experiences with the reality of permanent scarcity are mythologized as exciting and fun activities that showed solidarity and acted as the social glue of society. Products that were previously considered as inferior in terms of quality and design are now mythologized as superior and of long-lasting endurance. Marketplace communities relating to the consumption of these products emerge and recreate a sense of collectivism.

*Identification with previous socialist consumer culture.* Based on these mythologizing processes of the ideological grid of the GDR's socialist consumer culture, we witness the emergence of the creation of a national alternative and imagined collective identity. The mythologization of the GDR consumer culture as a collective society with a single shared national identity constructs an attractive myth for consumers that experienced a dislocation of their collective identity in the course of the re-unification, and interestingly also for younger consumers who experience problems with life in capitalism. However, this shared identity is a *retrospective* construction. Due to the dominant presence of the Western reference culture, the notions of collectiveness and national identity among East German

consumers were upstaged by consumers' longing for participation in the Western consumer culture, in particular their desire for individuality and distinction. Consumers leverage the newly accessible Western ideological myths—in particular freedom of choice—to actualize their collective identity via marketization of the 'new' socialist reference culture. Overall consumption of East German products increases and companies create and re-launch exclusive 'GDR brands', which were previously discarded but now valued again for their representation of a time when people were part of a community and looked after each other.

### CONCLUSION

Our study shows how the merger of two opposing consumer cultures takes place via the negotiation of ideological mythologies characterizing these consumer cultures. In these negotiation processes, the ideological tenets of these consumer cultures undergo both, mythologization and de-mythologization processes, imparting and challenging ideological-mythical qualities to and of these consumer cultures. The role of myths is thus twofold: on the one hand, they provide the source and fodder for the negotiation process. On the other hand, through mythologization processes, they facilitate the transition between and overcoming of binary oppositions, here between 'East' and 'West', by challenging dominant myths and establishing alternative myths, which shape consumption practices and in turn, serve consumers to find comfort with identity dislocation, specifically, collective identity. Thus, our findings somewhat mirror Giesler's (2008) evolutionary processes in which opposing ideological aims meet in processes of conflict and compromise. In our case, the sudden access to the Western consumption system is at first celebrated, due to its previous status as elusive reference culture and the related mythologization. Subsequently, however, there is a sobering experience of the loss of key ideological myths that offered meaning in GDR consumers' lives. Consumers experience and negotiate the ideological conflict between socialist and capitalist consumption mythologies after having switched sides, eventually leading to a supersession of the FRG reference culture by a mythologized version of the GDR culture. On this basis, ideologically-loaded consumption objects suitable to mitigate this conflict and to find compromise are particularly appreciated. Thus, our research demonstrates how the merger of contrasting consumer cultures is a multidimensional affair fueled by contradictions of their ideological grids.

\* Due to the 1 page length restriction for the data table, we were unable to represent all empirical data sources. Hence, space-consuming examples such as netnography conversations, visuals, as well as friendship profile-book entries are under-represented in this table.

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